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## Mediations of the climate-ecological emergency

### I

Climate crises with potentially catastrophic consequences have become a fundamental planetary state. This situation manifests with increasing certainty across a wide range of scientific disciplines. In response to accumulating data, nations, local municipalities, and universities around the world have declared a “climate emergency.”<sup>1</sup> These declarations typically reference a shared body of scientific evidence—rising global temperatures, escalating atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, the accelerating loss of biodiversity, and the approach

of a potential sixth mass extinction. It is a bleak outlook, repeatedly underscored by synthesis reports from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as well as by the influential five-year cycle assessments issued by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). What was once framed as distant future threats are increasingly being described as reflections of our current environmental reality.

This picture of a planetary emergency is defined by interconnected and unprecedented crises. Among them are rapidly increasing carbon emissions and biodiversity loss measured in the disappearance of countless species each month, as estimated by UNEP; widespread deforestation

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1 See <https://climateemergencydeclaration.org/climate-emergency-declarations-cover-15-million-citizens/>, accessed June 24, 2025.

that dramatically reduces the Earth's capacity to sequester carbon; industrial agriculture that depletes ecosystems and relies on exploitative and unsustainable practices, and the extensive extraction of natural resources. The overall consequences are severe, with cascading impacts across ecosystems, economies, societies, cultures, and political systems. Yet, despite the scale and clarity of these warnings, business-as-usual continues largely unabated. While calls for national and international climate action plans are widespread, a persistent and troubling gap remains between scientific declarations and the urgent actions required.

Writers and artists have responded to environmental threats since at least the Romantic era. Over time, filmmakers, designers, musicians, and other cultural producers have found ways to express anxiety, outrage, grief, and hope in the face of ecological degradation—a creative trend that has accelerated in recent decades. Drawing from different historical moments and regional contexts, and grounded in the specific affordances of various art forms and media types, a wide range of artistic strategies has emerged. While earlier environmental art and literature often conveyed emotional or sentimental protests against a vanishing natural world, today's aesthetic responses are more frequently rooted in some ratio of scientific knowledge—derived from scientific journals, popular science communication, or documentary media—and passionate resistance to an increasingly bleak future.

In this special issue of *Ekephrasis*, where a good handful of the articles originate from the international conference “Climate Emergencies across Media” at Linnaeus University in 2023, we have selected scholarly articles that explore, analyze, compare, or in some cases critique artistic works that engage with the climate-ecological emergency. These contributions share a conviction that the issue at hand is not merely about future risks or slow, incremental adaptations, but about a present and unfolding emergency. The artistic responses examined here are shaped by an urgency that demands both formal experimentation and aesthetic ingenuity. These works grapple with the complexity of planetary systems and ecological collapse, and many attempt to produce resonant artistic expressions that match both the darkness of the current moment and the scientific precision required to speak meaningfully about it. Some contributions even manage to articulate a cautious, conditional hope—one that leaves space for agency, resistance, and possible futures.

Thus, across science, international institutions, Indigenous communities, local activists, and increasingly in cultural fields, a broad recognition of the climate-ecological emergency has taken hold. This recognition has been articulated in language, music, performance, visual arts and activism—and has inevitably reverberated within academic institutions and disciplines concerned with culture, aesthetics, and communication in the broadest sense. The wide array of cultural forms involved shows that ecological emergency is always mediated, whether through data translated into charts and graphs or through additional, creative works that portray planetary fragility in ways that are perhaps easier to grasp.

The contributions to this issue reflect the rich, diverse, and evolving landscape of what can broadly be referred to as the environmental humanities (for a recent introduction

to Environmental Humanities, see Rubbell & Ryan, 2021). Over recent decades, this interdisciplinary field has branched into numerous, often overlapping, currents of theoretical inspiration and critical practice. These streams have both converged and diverged, forming a dynamic intellectual ecosystem that continues to expand and shift in response to global ecological challenges and academic innovations.

In the 1990s, a recognizable tradition of green studies and ecocriticism began to emerge, primarily within literary studies and especially rooted in Anglophone academic contexts (a classical description of waves in ecocriticism is found in Buell 2011; for good discussions of contemporary ecocriticism, see Garrard 2023 and Clark 2015, and for ecocritical methods, see Brudin Borg et al. [eds]). Ecocriticism has evolved through multiple waves, each characterized by distinct corpora, theoretical orientations, and philosophical concerns. Also, from the outset, ecocriticism has been deeply shaped by feminist theory, which exerted a strong influence and eventually led to the development of dedicated strands of feminist and material/Marxist ecocritical trends (Plumwood 1993 and Gaard 2017). As the field matured, the emergence of New Materialist and posthumanist thought (e.g. Bennett 2010, Braidotti 2013, Haraway 2016, Alaimo 2016, Morton 2016) brought further complexity and depth to ecocritical frameworks, along with strong impetus from post- and decolonial work (Nixon 2011, Demos 2016, Dhillon 2022). All this has been pressing scholars to rethink the boundaries between nature, culture, agency, and creative expressions.

Over time, ecocriticism expanded beyond its literary foundations. Scholars in film studies, art history, game studies, and musicology have increasingly contributed to the ecocritical conversation, each bringing media-specific insights to the broader discourse. This diversification has significantly enriched the ecocritical palette, pushing the field toward greater interdisciplinarity. The emergence of media studies as a key site of environmental inquiry—particularly through the development of “ecomedia studies” (Lopez et al. 2023)—has marked a pivotal evolution, underscoring how environmental narratives and ideologies circulate across contemporary media forms.

Among the most recent directions are Empirical Ecocriticism and Intermedial Ecocriticism. The former integrates methodologies from audience research and reception studies, seeking to understand how readers, viewers, and users engage with ecological themes in cultural texts, and if or how ecological agency may be stipulated by cultural texts (Schneider-Mayerson et al. 2023). The latter combines the analytical breadth of intermediality—which emphasizes comparisons and connections across multiple media types—with the critical concerns of ecocriticism, opening new pathways for exploring how environmental meaning is constructed and communicated across diverse representational forms (Bruhn and Salmose 2024). Together, these developments underscore the vibrancy and adaptability of the environmental humanities, as they continue to respond to changing ecological realities and theoretical innovations with intellectual curiosity and critical rigor.

In the construction of this volume, a clear emphasis has been placed on media and intermedial studies (a broad overview of intermedial studies is found in Bruhn et al. 2023, and a more hands on introduction to intermedial terminology and methods is available in Bruhn and Schirmmacher (eds.) 2022 (see also Rajewsky 2002). As a result, many of the contributions, whether directly or indirectly, engage with media and intermedial approaches, highlighting their critical relevance in the environmental humanities. As a collective endeavor, it was crucial for the editors to incorporate a diverse range of media types, ensuring that the volume transcends traditional boundaries and categories. This includes bridging the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, popular culture and high art, as well as literature and other forms of mediation that shape and reflect current and historical cultural narratives. By embracing this broad spectrum, the volume seeks to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of media as a lens through which environmental concerns are explored, articulated, and represented. We have also noted the paradox of up-close climate disasters and the implicit mediation of those events through “elemental media” such as fire and water (Peters 2015 and Jue 2020), as well as the further mediation of news discourses, activist responses, and media products such as novels or films. In some of these cases, layers of mediation appear to help readers or viewers sense more urgency about planetary crises; in others, comfort with familiar tropes or even climate skepticism can result. Moreover, a central, though often subtle, thread running through many of the contributions is the emerging and urgent issue of ecojustice or climate justice. This represents perhaps the most significant recent development within the environmental humanities. The question of justice—whether environmental, social, or racial—has become a key focus, with many authors exploring how ecological issues intersect with broader concerns about inequality, power, and human rights. The call for justice in the face of climate change and environmental degradation resonates throughout this collection, underscoring its importance not only as an academic concern but as a moral and political imperative. Indeed, ecojustice and Rob Nixon’s powerful concept of “slow violence” (2011) serve as critical undercurrents in many of the pieces included here. These concerns, in tandem with the mediated aspects of ecological emergency, bind the diverse contributions together and reinforce the need for collective, transformative action in response to the ecological crises we face today.

## II

This volume’s contributions fit into a few broad categories: one concerns historical as well as more recent perspectives on environmental film and nonfiction while other essays discuss eco-fiction and adaptation. The question of activism and performativity is present in yet another small group of essays, and this issue of *Ekphrasis* ends with essays discussing the notion of a future planet under water, and how this may be represented in different media types.

The first article in the issue is Petr Bubeníček's piece on the mockumentary *Oil Gobblers*. It argues that humor has been effective in engaging audiences in critical questioning of issues such as ecological pollution, in this case mediated through the ironic genre of mockumentary in late-1980s Czech culture. Liri Chapelan is also interested in moving images, and in her article on press and amateur filmmaking in Romania she also focuses outside mainstream filmmaking to better understand the historical pressures of late socialist policies that could not directly address ecological crisis; the "floating" quality of these films resists easy intermedial analysis but does reveal human embeddedness in nature, the lack of portrayals of "pure" nature in such films, and oscillations between "the scenic and the pragmatic" and between efforts to preserve natural spaces and ongoing ecological degradation. Stefano Bracci Testasecca's article examines how scientific facts and journalistic narratives are reimagined in John d'Agata's *About a Mountain* (2010), a work he describes as a "lyric essay." Focused on nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain, the book blends multiple stories and departs from traditional journalism by using "ecstatic truth" to evoke ecological awareness. It also considers the theatre play *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), co-written with fact-checker Jim Fingal, which documents their debate over factual accuracy. This exchange highlights tensions between objective truth and creative nonfiction. Drawing on narratology, genre studies, and ecocriticism, the article defines the lyric essay's unique mix of fact and fiction, showing how it offers a distinct way to engage with environmental issues. A final essay in this section, Cecilia Strandroth's "Let the Camera Be a Weapon," problematizes nature photography as a way of engaging viewers with biodiversity crisis while at the same time—especially in the case of isolated animal images—maintaining a comfortable habit of appreciating nature as something framed and separate from humankind. Finally, Andreas Virginás theorizes the post-menopausal eco-warrior woman in small national European cinema as an archetype of ecological resistance. It links feminist standpoint theory and Global East perspectives to narratives of ageing, trauma, and environmental crisis.

The second section, focused on narrative strategies for engaging with ecological emergency (and their renderings as intermedial adaptation), opens with Ajeesh A. K.'s article on the "toxic sublime" in Samanta Schweblin's 2014 novel *Fever Dream*, along with its Netflix adaptation. The novel reflects the fragmentary and slow-violence qualities of environmental crisis while avoiding the "redemptive arc" and "spectacle" of conventional fiction and film. Mediation in this case works paradoxically to bring readers and viewers closer to the emergency through fragmentary, hallucinatory narrative. Silvia Kurr's article on Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* explores eco-ekphrasis as a form of mediation that allows trees to appear as characters in their own right and to shift readers' perception of human temporality and of trees as "passive entities" as usually portrayed in anthropocentric fictions. Signe Kjær Jensen's article on the children's animated film *Samson and Sally* shows how mediating the precarity of ocean life through a children's novel and film conveys a

didactic message on one level but also subverts anthropocentric tropes in order to invite deeper empathy with nonhuman beings.

In a third section, Andreas Jahrehorn Önnersfors and Annette Mars' article on Swedish doom metal shows how this genre can work as a form of "dark" ecomedia that treats sustainability practices as a form of global control. As a flip-side of ecological mediations that foster greater care for the environment, music with a conspiratorial message can engage listeners in the opposite direction. Hans T. Sternudd's examination of performances by the activist group Red Rebel Brigade shows the ambivalence of performative mediation, as striking images alone do not seem to engage climate-emergency attention with the same force as enacting a funeral ritual for nature. At the same time, even a performance that focuses on grief can foster more acceptance than action. Heidi Hart's curatorial essay on the dance production *Adventura Botanica* shows that a semantically open-ended performance can draw in audiences to think curiously and critically about fragile life-forms; what might otherwise come across as a didactic portrayal of a hawk moth's life and death becomes more mysterious, intimate, and engaging in an open, sidelong approach than it might in a more explanatory way. Miriam de Paiva Vieira's article on environmental racism in the Brazilian webcomic *Confinada* shows how mediating urban and architectural structures activate awareness of less tangible structures: systems of environmental and racial injustice that are still easy to take for granted. Maxime Geervliet's study of the "Teenage Climate Hero," from the Norwegian series *Ragnarok* to mediations of Greta Thunberg's image, shows that metafictional valorization of such heroes can actually undermine ecological messaging, by "reinforcing the problematic rhetoric that future generations alone must solve the climate crisis."

The last section, on the future planet Earth under water, begins with Adela Negustor who, in *Spheres of the Aquatocene*, investigates how the aquatic imaginary makes submerged histories resurface via intermedial artworks curated for the Toronto Biennial's Cinesphere. Inspired by Ballard's *The Drowned World* and Wark's concept of "low theory,"<sup>24</sup> artists face climate anxieties through film, sound, and archive. Works like *Bubble Metropolis* and *Cargo Coral* critique colonial legacies and reimagine human-ocean relations through speculative media forms. These pieces spatialize ecological transformation and disrupt linear narratives, proposing new planetary imaginaries in the age of the Aquatocene. Kricie Ann Jonsson's *Drowned Futures and Ecological Reflections* explores how the mural *Manifest Destiny* and the video game *The Aquatic Adventure of the Last Human* portray a world after human extinction. Through a comparative, ecocritical lens, Jonsson examines how each work imagines nature reclaiming the Earth and invites viewers or players to reflect on ecological collapse. By focusing on the unique qualities of each medium, the study reveals how visual art and games differently shape emotional tone and environmental awareness. The project also considers how these works fit into a growing body of disanthropic, eco-speculative storytelling. Malin Löf Nyqvist's exploration of paratextual maps in flood fiction further amplifies the theme of this section, as this essay probes visual-textual storyworlds that may or

may not aid in imagining responses to rising seas, a project that encourages further research into intermedial narratives of ecological crisis.

### III

There are many lessons to learn from this broad panoply of critical engagements with eco-orientated arts across conventional media borders. To begin with, it seems obvious that the future of ecocriticism and ecomedia studies lies in their ability to evolve into truly cross-disciplinary and cross-medial fields. As the environmental crises we face grow increasingly complex and interconnected, it becomes ever more essential to bridge the gaps between the humanities, the sciences, and the arts. Ecocriticism and ecomedia studies must not only analyze literature, film, visual arts, music and digital media, but also engage with ecological science, political theory, and technological innovation as well as being part of technophilosophical reflections. This integrative approach can foster a richer understanding of how cultural narratives shape—and are shaped by—our relationship with the environment.

One of the central challenges in this endeavor is how to articulate the gravity and indeed urgency of ecological emergencies without inducing paralysis or apathy in audiences. Alarmist rhetoric, while sometimes necessary, can in some cases backfire by overwhelming individuals and communities, leading to disengagement or so-called “alert fatigue” (Baseman et al 2013) rather than action. Therefore, scholars and creators must find ways to communicate environmental urgency that inspires agency, resilience, and hope, rather than despair. This involves experimenting with new forms, genres, and platforms that can convey complexity without sacrificing emotional resonance.

As a result of this, but here of course we speak from within the field of arts and humanities, there is a pressing need for policymakers, business leaders, and other decision-makers to recognize and take seriously the profound insights and imaginative capacities that reside within the cultural and creative sectors. The arts and humanities are not peripheral to the climate conversation—they are central to how societies imagine futures, process trauma, and mobilize change. If we are to confront the monumental challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice, we must not expect to “solve” them in a traditional sense. Donna Haraway (2016) urges us to “stay with the trouble” instead, and here the arts but also critical theory have many lessons to teach: we must learn to face the threats and problems honestly, accept their implications and complexities as “wicked problems” (Lönngren & Van Poeck, 2021), and act with both courage and creativity.

Only by embracing the seriousness and the transformative potential of cultural work can we hope to foster the kinds of systemic shifts that are necessary. Ecocriticism and ecomedia studies, in this light, are not merely academic disciplines—they are vital tools for reimagining the world and our place within it.

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